

Dealing with Iran

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Articles & Testimony

Why worry about Iran? Because the new U.S. intelligence report says Iran is making great progress at its huge fuel-cycle factories in producing enriched uranium, which is the fissile material at the core of a nuclear bomb. The report says Iran will have enough enriched uranium for a bomb sometime between 2010 and 2015.

The hard part of making a nuclear bomb is making the fissile material. The easy part is what the new U.S. intelligence report calls the "nuclear weapons program" part, which is turning the fissile material into a bomb.

The new report says that in 2003 Iran halted its "nuclear weapons program." We do not know why. The optimist will say Iran is re-thinking whether to be satisfied with being on the brink of having a bomb instead of actually building one. The pessimist will say Iran already has made enough progress that it does not need to re-start the bomb-assembly program until it gets closer to having enough fissile material.

Fissile material, rather than bomb-assembly skills, is what proliferation is all about. For 40 years, the world's system for stopping the spread of nuclear weapons has been based on controlling the production of fissile material, such as Iran's fuel-cycle facilities.

According to the Nobel-Peace-Prize-winning director of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohammed El Baradei, if Iran completes the fuel-cycle facilities it is building, it will be "only a few months" away from a bomb.

Iran's former chief nuclear negotiator Hassan Rowhani agrees. He has written that once Iran completes its facilities, it will have all the technical means for making a bomb.

How can Iran get away with building such dangerous facilities? Because the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty offers a bargain: Countries can have dangerous nuclear capabilities if they are completely open, honest and transparent about what they are doing. According to the IAEA, Iran, however, has been hiding its nuclear activities for 19 years and still refuses to answer important questions.

That is why the U.N. Security Council has ordered Iran to suspend its enrichment program until Iran has re-established international confidence by being more transparent. The Security Council has twice unanimously approved sanctions against Iran for failing to comply.

The United Nations imposed sanctions because Iran refuses to fulfill its treaty obligations. The United Nations has never said Iran had a nuclear weapons program. In fact, some governments which supported the U.N. sanctions -- including Russia, China, and Germany -- have long said they do not think Iran has a nuclear weapons program.

The United Nations' goal has been to get Iran to provide a complete accounting about its nuclear activities. If the new U.S. intelligence report is correct that Iran did have a nuclear weapons program in the past, then Iran is required by the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty to reveal full details about that effort.

Only a full accounting can assure us Iran has stopped its illicit activities and is not hiding anything else.

Why does it matter if Iran obtains nuclear weapons?

Iran has long been feared by its neighbors -- and not surprisingly, given Iran's conviction that it should be the great power in the region. The fears have only grown in the years since 1979, when Iran came under the rule of radical revolutionaries.

A nuclear-armed Iran would almost certainly start an arms race that would destabilize the Persian Gulf, a region which the world depends upon for its oil supplies.

In response to Tehran's nuclear progress, nine Middle East countries have announced that they are re-examining their nuclear options, raising the frightening prospect that Iran could start a nuclear arms race in the region.

Indeed, the worry of the great powers is that a nuclear-armed Iran would put at risk the entire 40-year global effort to stop the spread of nuclear weapons. If Iran could exploit the nonproliferation treaty to acquire nuclear technology without political cost and then leave the treaty so as to develop a nuclear bomb, other countries around the world might be tempted to do the same thing.

A distinguished academic has claimed that proliferation is of no concern because possession of nuclear weapons makes countries act more soberly. One of his learned colleagues suggested applying this theory to automobiles: If every vehicle had sticks of dynamite tied onto its fenders, then drivers would act responsibly for fear of the consequences. The flaw in that theory is that people miscalculate, which is why we should oppose proliferation whether by Iran or any other signatory to the nonproliferation treaty.

As the new U.S. intelligence report shows, there is good reason for optimism that pressure on Iran can persuade it to end the nuclear standoff. Diplomacy works best when it is backed by sticks and carrots.

The task at hand is to make Iran's choice more stark -- to wield a bigger stick and simultaneously offer a bigger carrot.

The model would be the U.S. response to Iran's shipments of arms to Iraqi insurgents. Washington simultaneously opened official dialogue with Tehran (the carrot) and arrested a dozen Iranian agents operating in Iraq (the stick). The result has been a sharp drop-off in Iranian shipments of advanced explosive devices to Iraqi fighters.

If our diplomacy fails, the two options available -- pre-emption or deterrence -- are both terrible.

Precisely because the alternatives are so bad, we should be making every effort now to offer bigger carrots and wield bigger sticks, so that diplomacy can resolve the Iranian nuclear problem.

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